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DON WILLIS

Fritz Lang: Only Melodrama

The publication of a clutch of books in the past few years on the late, Austrian-born director Fritz Lang seems a likely occasion for reassessing and reevaluating his long career in Germany and America. It has now been ten years since the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's first major Lang retrospective, and his achievement is beginning to seem less formidable than it did then.

After reading *Fritz Lang* by Lotte H. Eisner (Oxford University Press, 1977) and *Fritz Lang* by Robert A. Armour (G. K. Hall, 1978), one might conclude that there is just not much to be said about his work. At least Armour and Eisner have little to contribute to an understanding of it.

Lotte Eisner admits in her preface that her close friendship with Lang made writing difficult and may have clouded her objectivity; and her writing in *Fritz Lang* is indeed generally vapid and naive, and often defensive. Eisner on a scene in Lang's *Cloak and Dagger*: "This, however, is no sentimental boy-meets-girl situation." On Lang's *While the City Sleeps*: "It is myopic to see this film—as at least one German critic did—as no more than a 'thriller'." Eisner's book is primarily synopses of films punctuated by stray, timid analytical interjections ("No detail is wasted in Lang"), as if she were afraid of intruding on the master at work. When she does venture an idea of her own, the

PHOTO ABOVE: Gloria Graham in *THE BIG HEAT*

results are as often as not unfortunate: "What [Lang] wanted to say was that the ultimate reason for the murders [in *M*] is the unequal distribution of wealth. Frau Beckmann is forever at the tub; hence she has no time to look after Elsie properly, or to fetch her from school." A handy word, "myopic."

Armour's *Fritz Lang* centers on the theme of "the dark struggle" (i.e., "man's psychological fears"), and to give the book the appearance of unity and coherence, he uses the word "struggle" 600 times, mechanically injecting it into every section and almost every paragraph: "[The killer's] struggle [in *While the City Sleeps*] is with the police and the reporters who are trying to chase him down. This is a curious struggle, unlike any other Lang created on the screen. This is both a struggle and a surrender." Armour's struggle is with the English language: "Those characters of [Lang's] that survive and emerge from [the dark struggle] without surrendering to it are those in whom there is enough decency to keep them out of the pits of degeneracy." Armour's conclusion, after 150 pages: "The dark struggle is a worthy theme, a theme that gives meaning to the visual images that dominate the films of Fritz Lang."

If there is a correlation between the quality of the artist's work and the quality of the criticism inspired by that work, Lang may be in trouble. Commenting on the scene in Lang's *You Only Live Once* in which Joan (Sylvia Sydney) suggests to Eddie (Henry Fonda) that the frogs in the pond at their honeymoon inn may "see something in each other that no one else can see," George Wilson concludes that "it is clear that what the frogs see in Joan and Eddie is not to be known." Lang may indeed be in trouble. And perhaps that's as it should be. Was he indeed no more than a director of "thrillers"? Why do critics defending Lang usually sound like they're apologizing for him? Jonathan Rosenbaum: "Critics hung up on 'craft' and intentionality will probably never be able to see [*The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Hindu Tomb*, Lang, 1959] as a dazzling achievement. . . ." Andrew Sarris: "[Lang] has always lacked the arid sophistication lesser directors display to such advantage." By implication, Lang's career was distinguished by a fertile crudity, sloppy craftsmanship, and lack of artistic control.

The earliest examples we have of Lang's work, *The Golden Sea* and *The Diamond Ship*—completed parts one and two of a projected four-part "series" called *The Spiders* (1919)—are in some ways representative of much of that work. Serial-like, they feature the most rudimentary of "thrills"—actors menaced by rooms filling up with water or the walls of a room coming together—and have, to put it mildly, no character, story, or thematic interest. Pre-art, they qualify at best as slow, dull camp. The second part is perhaps even more slowly paced than the first, and duller, or just longer (about 80 minutes long, compared to 50 for the extant version of *The Golden Sea*). "Action," in both parts, usually means that (a) something is about to happen, and (b) something has happened, but (c) thanks to the awkward staging and editing you can't quite be sure what or how.

Lang's *Destiny* (1921), a three-story film with a linking narrative, has some stunning sets and effects, but the first two stories are dramatically nil. The third story, an Oriental fantasy-comedy, is slight but amusing, and the framing story, in which Death comes between two lovers, has occasional force. As with other silent German Langs like *Siegfried*—the first part of *Die Nibelungen* (1924)—*Metropolis* (1926), *Spies* (1928), and *Woman in the Moon* (1928), the pictorial overwhelms the dramatic. The above-cited films tend to make better stills than films. And accordingly, the most impressive of the new books on Lang is Frederick W. Ott's *The Films of Fritz Lang* (Citadel, 1979), a treasure-trove of photographs ransacked from the film archives of the world. (The most nearly satisfactory critical work on Lang in English is still Paul Jensen's *The Cinema of Fritz Lang*.) Ott's extensive coverage of Lang's German spectacles like *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis* will leave you drooling, though Lang's American films are more cursorily and less impressively illustrated.

One begins looking for "composition" in a film like *Spies* because there's nothing else to look for. And one finds it: Lang's choreography of Rudolf Klein-Rogge's movements as masterspy Haghi is most striking. But Klein-Rogge is the only really distinctive feature of a thriller which features not

one but two tired Mata Hari plots, and lots of predictable last-minute escapes.

Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler (two parts, 1922) was subtitled "A Portrait of Our Time," and Lang himself called it "a document of its time." But as film historian Barry Salt has pointed out in *Sight and Sound*, *Dr. Mabuse* is really "no more than a vastly expanded version of the Danish and French master criminal thrillers which flooded the German market in pre-war days. . . . Lang's film is not even much of an improvement in craftsmanship, despite the several years of development there had been in film technique elsewhere." Reviews of the film in Germany at the time of its release exulted: "No vice of our time is forgotten. . . . It is a mirror of the age. . . . Not one important symptom of the post-war years is missing. Stock exchange manoeuvres, occultist charlatanism, prostitution and over-eating, smuggling, hypnosis and counterfeiting, expressionism, violence and murder!" This "portrait" sounds more like a sensationalistic checklist, and anyone new to the film has to be surprised to find—behind all the sociological sensationalism—a standard cops-and-robbers yarn.

Much more intriguing than the film itself is the critics' insistence on its "importance," on its sociological acuteness. If *Dr. Mabuse* were more successful as "(no more than) a thriller," would Lang and the reviewers still feel the need to inflate its importance? Lang's follow-up *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1932) is far more exciting than the original—an exception to the rule of inferior sequels, and probably the best of Lang's serial-like thrillers—and the press on it is, accordingly, less shrill and defensive. *Testament* doesn't need outside help—as his last, feeble entry in the series, *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960), does. The performances in the first *Mabuse* range from the broad, "silent movie" type to the relatively inconspicuous, and even Mabuse himself (played by Klein-Rogge) is a standard supercriminal role, not far removed from that of the dreaded Lio-Sha of *The Spiders*. As a melancholic evocation of a "decadent," suicide-shadowed closed society, a film like Val Lewton's *The Seventh Victim* (1943) is much more successful than *Dr. Mabuse*, and no one has had to resort to quoting news stories

about devil worship in the Greenwich Village of the time to justify the existence of the former.

Metropolis, like *Dr. Mabuse*, announces its own importance: "The heart must mediate between the brain that plans and the hands that build." The film has been much criticized for this simplistic social formula, and deservedly so. Good advice or not, it's still advice, and art is easier to take when it works more indirectly, more insidiously. *Metropolis*, however, does more than give advice—it also conjures up a succession of true scenic wonders: the robot Maria's creation scene; the vision of the machinery as Moloch; the visualization of Death and the 7 Deadly Sins; the Tower of Babel sequence; Rotwang's light impaling the true Maria. Lang and writer Thea von Harbou did possess a sense of spectacle. Unfortunately, in *Metropolis*—as in other Lang films—the spectacle seems almost incidental.* The stilted "frog" dialogue in *You Only Live Once*, for instance, is punctuated by a shot of one frog jumping into the pond, the waves from the splash obliterating the reflection of Joan and Eddie on the water. But the eerie delicateness of this image of foreboding is betrayed by the crudeness of development of plot and character, as, in *Metropolis*, the spectacle seems sacrificed to the message.

The plot of *Metropolis* can be summarized: the hero Freder always turns up in the right place at the right time. He's there when the heroine Maria brings her flock of children up from the underground world of the workers; there when one worker, exhausted, faints in his arms; there when another worker, exhausted, falls from the machinery, apparently to his death; there when

*It should be noted that the standard version of *Metropolis* might more accurately be called *Highlights from Metropolis*. The film was cut from 17 reels to 10 reels for its initial (1927) American release and—until very recently—was available (at least in this country) only in this truncated form. Lang called the result a "mutilated surrogate," and Paul Jensen contends that the "elimination of many scenes and the rewriting of some titles have excessively confused certain motivations and characters." But help is—finally—on the way: the Munich Film Museum has been restoring and reconstructing German film classics, including other Langs like *M* and *Die Nibelungen*—one lost hour of *Kriemhild's Revenge*, for instance, was found and restored—and according to Tom Luddy of Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive, the Museum has also at least partially succeeded in reconstructing the original, full-length *Metropolis*.

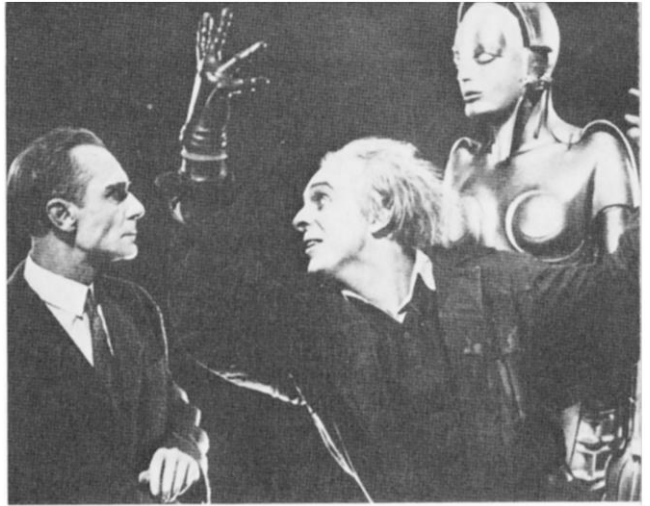
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Maria, kidnapped by Rotwang, screams for help, etc. Structurally, *Metropolis* is not just crude. It's downright brazen in its crudeness. You begin to wonder if this incredible series of narrative coincidences might not be part of some arcane aesthetic tactic. But it finally seems closer to simple didacticism than to aesthetics—*Metropolis*, or A Portrait of Freder's Consciousness Rising in His Time.

Metropolis, with its mixture of spectacle and camp, is a gigantic, grotesque curiosity. It contains several hilarious ideas of acting, including Brigitte Helm's impaled-on-light expressions as Maria and Gustave Fröhlich's prolonged, agonized enlightenment. And Helm's robot Maria is certainly amusing too. The question is, was she *supposed* to be amusing as Lang's slinky, mechanical embodiment of evil? Is his idea of evil here just plain silly, or is he making fun of the notion of pure evil? Freder and Maria are simply bad ideas, but that robot is not quite as easily dismissed from the mind.

Lotte Eisner calls it "fate" or "chance" or "destiny." Sarris and others call it "the trap." Gavin Lambert likes to call it "fatality." And David Thomson arrives—through some metaphysical contortions—at "the fatalness of melodramatic certainty." But what they all seem to be talking about—in reference to Lang's American films—is simply plot. In *You Only Live Once* (1937), narrative coincidences like Eddie's breaking out of prison just as his pardon arrives, or the auto court man's spotting the fugitive, Joan, at the cigarette machine, can (as in *Metropolis*) be more readily ascribed to facile plotting than to the workings of Fate. Lambert euphemizes these coincidences as "a series of deliberate ironic coincidences." And it's true—you're *supposed* to be aware of the coincidences in the plot of *You Only Live Once*—danger! they cry, the irony of Fate at work—whereas in *Metropolis*, where they're just means to a didactic end, you're supposed to ignore them. But what it comes down to is the difference between trying to hide the mess one has made (*Metropolis*) and calling attention to it (*You Only Live Once*).

In Lang's *Woman in the Window* (1944), it's



METROPOLIS: Rotwang and the robot Maria

the plot that stipulates that Raymond Massey is both the DA and amateur killer Edward G. Robinson's friend, the plot that stipulates that there is a cab outside the apartment building as Robinson and Joan Bennett are about to spirit out the body of her boy friend, etc. Lang's vaunted "determinism" begins to look more like tired writing or heavy-handed irony—a mechanical "Well, wouldn't you know it?" as the "last thing you'd expect to happen" invariably does happen in his American films: near the conclusion of *Woman in the Window*, Robinson poisons himself . . . just as the blackmailer (Dan Duryea) is shot to death—i.e., just as *Robinson's* pardon arrives. Sentimental optimism: the pardon arrives in the nick of time. Sentimental pessimism: the pardon arrives a moment too late. Lang's American films are sentimentally ironic situation dramas.

Even Lambert worries that the events in *You Only Live Once* might "sound unacceptably fabricated." But then he adds, "Yet it is this arbitrariness that gives to the film its curious and memorable force." How does one get from "fabricated" to "arbitrariness" to "force"? Answer: "Lang brings it off by keeping rigidly to his schematic conception." The key words here are "rigidly" and "schematic," and, like "fabricated" and "arbitrariness," they are Lambert's, and I will be glad to let them stand.

Lang's conception of Fate in his American films might best be described as Sternberg without wit. *You Only Live Once* and *Woman in the Window* are, in significant ways, near-opposites of a film

like *The Blue Angel* (1930), in which the hero Professor Rath becomes tragically enmeshed in the gears of a mechanism which *he* set in motion. The Sternberg picture—stingingly comic—has none of the phony somberness of *You Only Live Once*, whose fugitives are “innocents” abroad in a mean, nasty world which is (carefully) peopled with insensitive, uncaring employers and officials. The tone of the Lang film is whining, self-pitying. Poor little Eddie and Joan can’t escape “the stain of the world,” to quote one character. The script constitutes a too-easy absolution of individual responsibility. Glumly, it proposes that it’s *others* who set the gears in motion.

Sternberg might have turned that script into a high comedy about two people with a shared persecution complex—justified by circumstances or not—into something, that is, like *The Devil is a Woman* (1935), in which Marlene Dietrich is Lionel Atwill’s own personal, perverse Fate. The world of *Devil is a Woman* is colored by the comic complementarity of Dietrich and Atwill, but Lang finds nothing funny about the situation of Joan and Eddie in *You Only Live Once*. He intends his film to be a condemnation of a corrupt society which corrupts the individual, though it’s actually closer to a ringing indictment of insensitivity. The script’s alternate, equally simplistic theses are that Eddie was “born bad” (as two characters at two different points in the film suggest) or that society made him bad. But society, not Eddie, is obviously the scapegoat, and the film is only after scapegoats. (Lambert: “*You Only Live Once* and *You and Me* [Lang, 1938] are . . . dramatic abstracts of society’s indifference to the outcast. . . .”) A few more “sensitive” and “caring” people in key positions in the world of *You Only Live Once*, and Joan and Eddie and the frogs would have lived happily ever after (on Earth).

In *Woman in the Window*, Robinson’s encounters with Joan Bennett and other pulp characters turn out to be a dream. No mechanism is set in motion. It’s as if Lang and scriptwriter-producer Nunnally Johnson had seen *The Blue Angel* and taken it as a cautionary fable. Their film is a call to unadventurousness. It opposes a sketchily drawn “everyday reality” to conventional, pulp-crime-drama “excitement” (i.e., Robinson’s

dream) and finds that dullness is best: leave adventure to Fritz Lang movies. *Woman in the Window* posits an average man to whom—ideally—nothing happens. It’s like a seriously wrong-headed reading of Henry James’s “The Beast in the Jungle.”²

The world of *Woman in the Window* and *You Only Live Once* is a sparsely populated one. “Fate,” in the form of over-clever plotting, is virtually the only inhabitant. Thomson asks us to “look past the melodrama and simplicity of Lang’s films,” but if we do we’ll probably only discover that there’s nothing there. What may, for instance, at first appear to be a nuance of characterization in *Woman in the Window*—say, Bennett’s initial mistrust of Robinson—is invariably revealed to be merely a kink in the plot—Bennett’s lack of trust leads her into keeping his coat, which contains a piece of evidence incriminating him. Of course since this ingenious plotting is also Robinson’s dream these kinks in the plot can also be seen as kinks in his psyche: characterization in *Woman in the Window* is purely retrospective.

Scarlet Street (1945), the Robinson-Bennett-Duryea companion film to *Woman in the Window*, is plot-constricted too, but it’s a solidly constructed melodrama—one of Lang’s few good American films. It lacks the social and philosophical dimensions of the original film version, Jean Renoir’s *La Chienne* (1931), as Edward G. Robinson’s Chris Cross lacks the sly wit and traces of self-contempt of Michel Simon’s Legrand: the diminished interest of the role may be due as much to Robinson’s rather monotonous playing as it is to the writing. But *Scarlet Street* has Dan Duryea (“For cat’s sake!”) and Joan Bennett (“Jeepers!”) as the pair who take advantage of Robinson’s passion for her. (Bennett was also good in Lang’s 1941 *Man Hunt*.) Their Johnny and Kitty are two of the very few characters in Lang’s American films to have a life apart from the demands of a plot. His hearty low humor and lusty self-appreciation, and her languorousness—she *oozes* in and out of beds, sofas and his arms—provide a type of human spectacle which Lang usually had no time to appreciate in his films. Their pet exclamations, as quoted above, are emblematic of

their absolute willfulness, their impatience with objects—like other people—foreign to their universe.

Hangmen Also Die! (1943), from a story by “Bert Brecht” and Fritz Lang (as the screen credits list them), is one of Lang’s most uneven films. The “inspirational” scenes of Czech resistance to the Nazi occupation in World War II are the worst. Even if one could accept Brian Donlevy, Walter Brennan, and Dennis O’Keefe as good Czech citizens, one would have trouble with Anna Lee, who projects all her emotions in the worst way. The second half of the movie—the frame-up of an informer—is standard Lang thriller stuff, both clever and contrived, over-elaborate yet sometimes exciting. It’s indicative of the film’s general unevenness that one of the most devastating bits—a man’s bowler hat rocking back and forth until it stops, as he dies offscreen—is preceded by the awkwardly staged, fast-motion smothering of the same man. And while the Czechs in the film are generalized, cardboard “good people,” the Germans—Reinhold Schuenzel, Alexander Granach, Tonio Selwart, and Louis Donath—are, surprisingly, very vividly individualized, in all their petty self-indulgence and spleen. They might be Johnny and Kitty in the Third Reich. It is uncertain whether Lang sees Nazism as perfectly accommodating their personalities or vice versa. But his witty pinioning of the Gestapo officers almost makes *Hangmen Also Die!* “must” viewing, despite its weaknesses and length (over 130 minutes).

Ministry of Fear (1944), perhaps the weakest third of Lang’s mid-forties Dan Duryea trilogy, is hardly required viewing. It has a mildly intriguing plot (from a Graham Greene novel), with a World War II backdrop, and is well paced. Occasionally, it even has a hint of a purpose behind its bland forties-Paramount appearance, as if the blandness of its lighting and sets and its lead actors were ironically intended, concealing some dark truths or mysteries. But the presence of stars Ray Milland and Marjorie Reynolds insures that blandness will prevail. The pathetic last shot—which shows the two smiling big, “happy ending” smiles in a car, against badly-back-projected scenery—is the signature of a studio product, not a director or a writer. Irony is some

other planet. Both Milland and Reynolds have tragic pasts in the movie, but you couldn’t tell it from their faces, which look freshly cleaned and pressed—worry-and-wrinkle-free—and not from Milland’s bland light-comedy delivery. There’s a large gap between what we see in the film’s present and what we hear about the characters’ past.

After seeing *Ministry of Fear*, you remember the bullet-hole of light in the apartment door near the end. But you probably do not remember who shot whom, and for good reason—it hardly matters. Just before the hole appears, Nazi Carl Esmond calls out, “You wouldn’t shoot your own brother!” Marjorie does shoot him, but her big, dumb smile in the last image says—without irony—that there was nothing to it really. How does a critic get Lang out of this narrative spot? If he is David Thomson, he begins by suggesting that the doorways in *Ministry of Fear* “become as prominent as the characters”—failing to note that they do so almost by default. In a successful Lang film there is a counterpoint, an interplay between actors and architecture—but the furniture does not take over. In *Ministry of Fear*—with its actors-in-name-only—even a doorknob can become a star.

Thomson concedes that the “pinpoint of light” is “melodrama that muffles a sister killing her brother. . . .” But don’t go away. That pinpoint is more than just “melodrama”—it’s “part of Lang’s insinuation that spatial relationships are as profound as human relations. Doors last, but human beings pass in and out. The door stays to the bitter end.” Dubious considering the facts that (a) in the course of the film at least three doors are blown out and apart (along with walls and roofs) by bombs, or are broken, and (b) the film is set in wartime London during the blitz, a bad time for doors. Doors “pass in and out” too, at least figuratively, and they pass out here in at least as many pieces as the human beings do—Lang and the Mutability of Doors? In *Ministry of Fear* only those big dumb smiles last.

Cloak and Dagger (1946), yet another of Lang’s World War II dramas, is flimsy taken either as a suspenser or as a character study. The lighting (Sol Polito, photographer) is evocative Warners “noir,” but the treatment of the subject—OSS operations inside wartime Germany—is strictly

Hollywooden, full of instant characterizations-through-dialogue of Gary Cooper, Lilli Palmer, Vladimir Sokoloff, Helene Thimig. Palmer: "If you fight scum, you become scum." Cooper: "Why do you keep whipping yourself?" The characters' emotional-fireworks displays are unearned, gratuitous—as in *Ministry of Fear* the past remains sealed off from the present. Lang has to content his artistic self with shooting the main characters in mirrors, a reflex gesture left over from *M* and *Woman in the Window*.

In the fifties, Lang majored in "B"-film variations on *Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*: in *House by the River* (1950) and *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), the protagonist, "once off guard" (the title of the source book for *Woman in the Window*), kills or appears to have killed someone. In *House by the River* Louis Hayward, Jane Wyatt, and (strike three) Lee Bowman are helpless with the ungainly speeches and actions the script gives them. The river itself is interesting—the story is punctuated by eerie shots of fish leaping, branches, moonlight, a dead cow floating down the river. But the film—one of Lang's very worst—is near-nil on suspense, acting, characterization, and dialogue.

The *Blue Gardenia* is smooth and bland—a plot, with no overtones, undertones, or point—Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (down to the artist-seducer as victim) with nothing on it. Only Raymond Burr as the artist adds a bit of tone. The film has a "B"-mentality script, a "B" look, "B" acting, a budding "B" romance between Anne Baxter and Richard Conte, and a laughably hasty "B" wrap-up. *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956) is all plot too, with no humor, characters, or life to distract the viewer from the course of that plot—the Lang express makes few stops. The film exists solely for its twist ending. Though Barbara Nichols is amusing, in a small role as a loud blonde, the other characters are stick figures who twist and turn when the plot twists and turns. Lang's *Human Desire* (1954) is a dully written and acted remake of Renoir's 1938 *La Bête Humaine*, and *Moonfleet* (1955), a routine costumer, has a little of everything—action, suspense, comedy, horror (including a terrific gleaming-eyed statue in a cemetery)—but not much of anything in the way of narrative interest—which is not quite the same thing as plot.

Slightly more interesting than these "B"'s is *Clash by Night* (1952), Lang's version of a Clifford Odets play. At least it's character-centered, though it tends to package its people too neatly. Each character's pluses and minuses are carefully identified and labelled: Barbara Stanwyck, Robert Ryan, and Paul Douglas as the three corners of a romantic triangle each have affecting scenes, but you are too aware of when, say, you're seeing her "selfish" side and when you're seeing her "selfless" side—the result perhaps of Odets's or Lang's idea of "balanced characterization." And Stanwyck gets tough too often too colorfully. (Stanwyck on Ryan: "He could yank out my teeth and use them for watch fobs.") Ryan has some strong moments as the cynical-to-nihilistic projectionist, but he's a bit too extreme a character to be a believable romantic possibility for Stanwyck, even at her most colorful—sometimes he seems hardly a human possibility. The result is that Stanwyck ends up fluctuating crazily between Douglas ("security") and Ryan ("adventure"). As in *Woman in the Window*, security wins.

Why was Lang so often cast in the role of hack, peddling plots? Was he typed for thrillers—Hitchcock, Jr.? Or did his semi-adolescent fascination with the intricacies of pulp crime stories simply happen to mesh with the demands of a plot-centered American film industry? Whatever the explanation for this casting, his professional quandary was unfortunate, because the presence in Lang's films of such startling characters as Johnny and Kitty in *Scarlet Street*, the Gestapo people in *Hangmen Also Die!* and Ryan's character in *Clash by Night* suggests that he had a darker talent, one that too often went untapped or under-exercised, in both his German and his American films. Thrillers may too often have been an "escape" for him as well as for his audience. The German *M* (1931) and the American *Fury* (1936) are pivotal cases. They might at first glance appear to be relatively pure incarnations of the darker Lang. A child murderer and mob violence, respectively, are their subjects. But each film is really two films in one.

Lang and von Harbou devote a full 90 minutes of *M* to an intricate double-drag-net—one by criminals, one by police—for the murderer. The extended comparison-contrast between the two

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forces—united in purpose, separated by the law—is amusing but ultimately frustrating: it constitutes a withholding of the film's real subject—the configuration of the murderer's psyche. It's like a pair of tweezers that enables Lang to hold his subject at arm's length. When the murderer, Becker (Peter Lorre), accuses his captors, "You safecrackers and burglars shouldn't be proud of yourselves," he might be indicting the Lang who—like the criminals—loves to plan and plot and map out operations. The first 90 minutes of *M* are almost bereft of meaning until Becker "informs" them. Thanks principally to Lorre, Becker's climactic, 15-minute "speech" has a rhetorical if not quite a dramatic power.

As Becker, Lorre has to say too much, the better to inform the rest of the film. But he is at the same time, in effect, informing the rest of Lang too—the darker, more interesting Lang that is. "I don't want to [kill], but I can't help it": Becker's compulsiveness is also that of Johnny in *Scarlet Street*, the Ryan character in *Clash by Night*, the mob and—in the second half of *Fury*—the Spencer Tracy character, the Mabuse-haunted Dr. Baum in *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, the robot Maria in *Metropolis*. These characters resemble the unstoppable "monsters" in Howard Hawk's films—Tony Camonte (*Scarface*), Oscar Jaffe (*Twentieth Century*), Walter Burns (*His Girl Friday*)—but the latter comprise only one exhibit among many in Hawks's gallery of characters. Lang seemed to have the knack for creating and illuminating only this one type of creature. This gift, however, proved (when exercised) to be a formidable one. It's not the momentary slip of the Robinson characters—"once off guard"—in *Scarlet Street* and *Woman in the Window* which drives Becker to kill. The latter two films peel away "fate," or rather "situation," from "character." The two forces are one, in *M*, in the person of Becker—"myself pursuing myself" as he bitterly exclaims. The figures of Baum-Mabuse and Becker posit a pursuing Fate which is an internal force rather than just a kind of glue in which one happens to become stuck.

While the City Sleeps (1956) qualifies as Lang's loose, American version of *M*, with John Barrymore, Jr., as the compulsive killer, and with a pulp plot about unlovely people in the publishing world as the "tweezers": pulp material usually



M: Peter Lorre's "trial"

transcended Lang rather than vice versa. Heavy instant psychology vies with amusing actor bits and lines in a film which is by turns witty, silly, and dull, and is actually little more evasive than *M* itself, though it's a less even film.

Fury attempts to situate its lynch-mob story within the story of a "typical American couple"—Tracy and two-note Sylvia Sidney again. (The first note: sickly sweet; the second: piteous.) The larger story does not survive the inevitable, and perhaps necessary, compression and the schematic plot, in which elements like peanuts, a torn coat, and Tracy's misspelling of the word "memento" turn up with too-handy regularity. However, the mob sequences themselves, and the scenes of the newsreels singling out members of that mob—and isolating their awful exultation—still carry a surprising impact. Like the scenes of Glenn Ford exacting revenge for the murder of his wife in Lang's later *The Big Heat* (1953), the best sequences in *Fury* portray a frightening "right" or "good" run wild—small town citizens burning a jail that houses a supposed kidnapper; later the victim of this assault (Tracy) wreaking legal revenge on them. Lang gets the viewer rooting *for* and *against* the "good guy"—Tracy, Ford—at the same time. One becomes caught between exultation and horror, as the punishment—the act of revenge—takes on the configuration of the crime. Only then does Lang appear to be exploring the implications of the action and violence in his films, the implications of his fascination with violent crime. (He once wrote an article titled, "Why I Am Interested in Murder.") Only then does he seem to illuminate both the subjective attraction and the objective ugliness of violence.

The Big Heat is even more disjointed than *Fury*, taking off as it does in a new narrative direction every 15 minutes or so. But it is admirable at suggesting the double-edged wrath of the righteous—Ford seething and fuming with contempt for everyone he meets; Gloria Grahame returning Lee Marvin's favor of boiling coffee in the face. When other members of the cast comment on Ford's strange single-mindedness, he just seethes harder. Though Lang perhaps *intends* his actor to look a trifle foolish, Ford's intentness at times recalls Robert Young and his silly "grim determination" look in *Western Union* (1941), a happily forgotten Lang Western.

Lang made two camp versions of the *M-Fury*—*The Big Heat* syndrome—*Rancho Notorious* (1952) and *Secret beyond the Door* . . . (1948)—which are far from good but also far from dull. The more celebrated of the two, *Rancho Notorious*—weakest of Lang's revenge sagas—is striking, garish, fast moving, always faintly ridiculous, and sometimes—as with "The Ballad of Chuck-a-Luck" (and its "hate, murder and revenge") and Arthur Kennedy's "maddened with revenge" routine—wholly ridiculous.

James Agee called *Secret beyond the Door* . . . "a worthless movie," and one can certainly understand the harshness of his judgment: somewhere, he must have thought, there's someone who might take this movie *seriously*. But Agee could not quite have foreseen that Lotte Eisner would find in it a "poetic-dreamlike fluidum which gives credibility and logic to events which would otherwise be only melodrama," though he would, I'm sure, have appreciated her discovery of this magical fluidum. *Secret* is certainly not "only melodrama," a charge that may apply to four out of five Lang films, but not to this one. It's closer to something like camp horror-romance-psychological drama. It switches gears with hilarious abruptness: psychopathic Michael Redgrave, about to throttle wife Joan Bennett, will suddenly stop and reminisce: "I *remember*. It was summer. . . ." We (and he) then learn why he is about to strangle her, and also—not incidentally—why he is obsessed with lilacs. He now no longer feels he has to murder her; she can relax. Meanwhile, however, someone has set the place on fire. . . . The pulpy, stream-of-consciousness narration by Bennett

("Why did I suddenly think of daffodils?") is an unintentional joy in itself, and the movie's big surprise and shock scenes are more comic than horrific. Only spoilsports will object that this is Lang making a joke of *M*.

The emotional "fury" of Lang's *Fury* and *The Big Heat* seems to have had its source in the second half of Lang's silent version of *Die Nibelungen—Kriemhild's Revenge* (1924). The first half, *Siegfried*, is like a static prologue, but *Kriemhild's Revenge* is powerful and, finally, even disturbing. The implacability of character suggested by the cry, in *M*, of "The only thing that will stop you is death!" also informs the action of *Kriemhild's Revenge*, in which (unlike *Metropolis*) differences between the principals—Kriemhild, Hagen, Attila—are not subject to arbitration. Justified revenge becomes slaughter as Kriemhild's foes fall, and "right" becomes indistinguishable from "wrong."

But this theme of implacability finds what may be its most moving expression in Lang in, surprisingly—since it is so little shown or seen—*Liliom* (1934), his joyous adaptation of the Molnar play, and perhaps his finest film. There must have been something in the atmosphere in France at the time—and something in Molnar conducive to Lang's own talent. The rhetorical power of the last 15 minutes of *M* becomes the sustained comic-dramatic power of *Liliom*, in which the protagonist's compulsion is not only named but analyzed. Becker's cry of "I can't help it!", vividly visualized in the newsreel freezes on the mob members in *Fury*, Lang first caught on a film-within-a-film in *Liliom*: the heavenly officials weighing the evidence for and against *Liliom* (Charles Boyer, probably the best he has ever been) run him a scene from his life—during an argument, he slaps his girl, Julie (Madeleine Ozeray)—pinpointing for him and them his responsibility for his actions.

Liliom, like Becker, finds he can't escape himself. Yet when his thoughts while slapping Julie are made audible—as the film is run again in slow motion—they are: "Stop . . . stop . . . stop. . . ." At the same time that this film-within-a-film is establishing *Liliom*'s responsibility for his past actions, it is also establishing that there is another, contrary force—another *Liliom*—who is as much a victim of those actions as Julie is. This

LILIOM:
Charles
Boyer and
Viviane
Romance
(bow in
hair)



brief scene drawn from *Liliom*'s life records both the fact of his responsibility and his recognition of that fact: if, visually, it anticipates the news-reel freezes in *Fury*, the words "Stop . . . stop . . . stop . . ." anticipate the look of horror on the one defendant's face in the same film when Sylvia Sidney—testifying about Tracy and herself before his apparent death in the burning jail—says simply, "We were going to be married." In both cases, in both films, recognition comes too late.

The film-within-a-film in *Liliom* is neither condemnation nor exoneration of *Liliom*. It's only a description of someone both controlling and controlled by his actions, accountable yet helpless. In the film, *Liliom* is shuttled back and forth between heaven and earth, purgatory and hell, in a very determined celestial attempt to find just the right place for him. The problem is that from one angle, he's guilty; from another, innocent. He is punished, repentant, yet incorrigible; nearly damned by his misdeeds, finally saved by his almost-good-deeds.

Astonishingly, *Liliom* has not been generally available in the United States for many years. It has been shown recently only without titles or with hastily improvised English titles at a few museums. When the Los Angeles County Museum of Art held their Fritz Lang retrospective in 1969, the

director appeared in person and chose *Liliom* as the film to represent him on opening night. The legacy of Lang the artist is mostly one of parts of films—parts of *Scarlet Street*, *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, *Fury*, *M*, *Hangmen Also Die!*, and *The Big Heat*. But it's also the whole of *Kriemhild's Revenge* and, perhaps above all, *Liliom*, the two decided exceptions to the rule of Lang the melodramatist, the Lang shallowly fascinated by crime and violence and psychopathology. Only in *Kriemhild's Revenge* and *Liliom* does that fascination become the *subject* of the film, and the impersonal become personal.

NOTES

1. In "Structures of Narrativity in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*" (*Film Quarterly*, Summer 1974), Alan Williams describes Maria's kidnapping in semiological terms: "The next narrative function in the film is the abduction of Maria by Rotwang from the catacombs to his house—a typical narrative transfer complete with spatial discontinuity." His essay's semiological tests are intended to yield meaning from "the profoundly resonant text of *Metropolis* . . ." But the tendency of his art-is-a-science rhetoric is away from rather than toward meaning—toward, rather, simple restatement of the plot in abstruse, "scientific" terms.
2. Alfred Appel, Jr., (*Film Comment*, Nov.-Dec., 1974) finds pathos in "the definitive self-knowledge supplied by Wanley's nightmare," but the story of a man who discovers that he's dull is not necessarily sad.